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THE SOVIET UNION AND THE MPLA: LIKELY FUTURE RELATIONSHIP

The attached Note has been prepared by the Assessments Staff in consultation with the Departments and Agencies concerned.

Signed B O WHITE
Assessments Staff

Cabinet Office
21 January 1976

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THE SOVIET UNION AND THE MPLA: LIKELY FUTURE RELATIONSHIP

1. In this Note we examine relations between the Soviet Union and the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), assess the likely future development of that relationship and consider possible implications for Western interests, particularly in Southern Africa. We assume that the MPLA will come out on top, either as the result of more or less complete military victory or by the creation of a coalition in which they would be the dominant partner.

I. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

2. The Soviet Union has backed the MPLA since the early 1960s. The progressive increase in Soviet military aid since March 1975 has ensured that the MPLA will not be defeated.

3. The situation in Angola has provided the Russians with new opportunities for political pentration of Africa and at the same time an opportunity to demonstrate that neither detente nor domestic difficulties restrict their ability to pursue firm and active policies abroad. Any strategic and economic advantages in Angola itself are likely to be secondary.

4. The MPLA will be dependent on Soviet (and Cuban) support until they have either won or become the dominant force in a coalition. Thereafter, African factors are likely to come into play, and to assist MPLA's professed desire to reduce their dependence on the Soviet Union in the longer term; though much will depend on how long the struggle continues. In the short term at least the Russians are likely to have increased their scope for troublemaking in other parts of Southern Africa.

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Conclusions

5. i. The Russians have both an ideological and a national interest in supporting their chosen "Liberation Movement", the MPLA. But their tactics in Angola are pragmatic and show a large element of opportunism. They have come to regard their policy in Angola as testing United States reactions to active pursuit of subversion and disruption in the third world. They are probably satisfied that detente has not so far been put at risk. A successful outcome to their support of the MPLA could encourage them to pursue similarly forward policies elsewhere in the third world when opportunity offers.

ii. The longer the MPLA remain militarily dependent on the Russians the greater the opportunities will be for the Russians to secure political (and some strategic) advantages enabling them to endanger Western interests by promoting instability in Southern Africa.

iii. The Africans have a deeply-ingrained fear of South African expansion. A key factor in reducing Russian influence in Angola is the ending of South African intervention, although the Russians would continue to enjoy some scope for interference so long as the Namibia issue remains unsettled.

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II BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

6. The MPLA, founded in Luanda in 1956, had its origins partly in an earlier, unsuccessful, attempt to establish a communist party in Angola. Ideologically the Movement was from the beginning attracted to the Soviet Union. Guerilla operations against the Portuguese began in 1961, since when the Movement has received varying degrees of support from the Russians in accordance with their general doctrine and practice of supporting national liberation movements in colonial areas. In the early 1960s the Soviet Union showed no special partiality for MPLA, giving a small amount of support to the principal rival movement, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA). For the first few years, Soviet aid was limited and sometimes apparently haphazard. From 1966 the Russians concentrated their support on MPLA, although the level remained limited. But they supplied enough small arms and ammunition to enable MPLA to carry on sporadic guerilla operations against the Portuguese in northern and eastern Angola and in the Cabinda enclave; and MPLA guerillas went for training to the Soviet Union, other Warsaw Pact countries and Cuba. The Cuban involvement dates from about 1965; as well as providing training in Cuba, the Cubans sent instructors to train MPLA guerillas in Congo (Brazzaville).

7. In the early 1970s the Soviet Union began to be more responsive to MPLA requests for arms, although by 1973 MPLA fortunes were at a low ebb because the movement became seriously split. This led to the defection of 2-3,000 guerillas under Daniel Chipenda, who has since been operating in southern Angola under the FNLA banner. Consequently, MPLA were in poor shape to take advantage of the Portuguese coup in April 1974, which took them (and the Soviet Union) by surprise. By contrast, their principal rivals, FNLA, were in better military shape than they had been for some years, following a decision by President Mobutu in 1972 to give them increased support, and the receipt of more help from China. (The third movement, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), was in no way comparable, as far as military strength was concerned, to either MPLA or FNLA.) It must have been apparent to MPLA that unless something were done quickly to enhance their military bargaining position they could be upstaged by FNLA. The Soviet Union evidently agreed, and by late 1974 the scale of Soviet military aid had begun to increase. Although, by the terms of the Alvor Agreement of

January 1975, the 3 nationalist movements agreed to co-operate in a transitional government and to participate in elections before independence (11 November), it is fairly certain that MPLA never intended to abide by the agreement, knowing that elections would not bring then to power. It was not until March 1975 that really substantial quantities of Soviet military aid started to arrive, mainly by sea through Pointe Noire. At the end of May the MPLA tried to seize power by coup d'etat, but failed. The Soviet Union then further raised the level of aid, enabling MPLA to drive both FNLA and UNITA out of Luanda during July and establish the basis for their subsequent claim at independence on 11 November to be the government of Angola.

8. Several weeks before independence, it had become evident that MPLA, even with increased Soviet and Cuban backing, were not going to have it all their own way. In early August 1975 it became apparent that the United States had decided to channel substantial aid to FNLA/UNITA and by September that the South Africans were operating well north of the Cunene river irrigation and development scheme installations, which are just across the South West African border with Angola. At the same time Zairian troops were sent into Angola to reinforce FNLA, while Zambia continued her support for UNITA. The Soviet Union at first reacted by increasing still further supplies by sea and then by mounting a sizeable airlift at the end of October, when the success of the South African armoured column moving up from the South seemed to be turning the tide against the MPLA. This had the hallmark of an emergency operation and deliveries included more sophisticated weapons than had been supplied before. The general pattern of Soviet reaction was to supply, at each stage, enough at least to ensure that the MPLA were in no danger of defeat; this has been sufficient also to enable them, in recent weeks, to take the offensive, and to open the prospect of ultimate victory.

III SOVIET OBJECTIVES

9. Although Africa has not rated highly in Soviet priorities, it is an area where, as elsewhere in the third world, the Russians have sought, whenever possible and by all their usual methods, to build up influence; to demonstrate their position as a world power on a par with the United States; to counter Western and Chinese influence; and to secure African countries as clients

or at least sympathisers within the non-aligned group. In this respect Soviet policy has been essentially opportunist. In 1974-75, the rapid approach to Angolan independence offered new and important opportunities to promote Soviet aims. The Russians seen to have believed in the earlier stages that with Soviet and Cuban help the MPLA would have a quick walkover,,while the United States was uncommitted to any particular outcome. They also probably saw an opportunity to demonstrate that neither detente nor domestic economic difficulties would restrict Soviet ability to pursue robust policies abroad. The subsequent intensification of supplies from October 1975 is understandable if it is assumed first, that the Russians were anxious to avoid the humiliation of defeat for their clients, the MPLA, and second, that they thought, not least in the light of Congressional attitudes, that the Americans would not carry their reaction to damaging extremes. So far the Soviet government probably reckon that their hopes of quick success have been largely justified; and they have championed a radical element in the third world without so far, damaging any important area of their relations with the United States. The Russians have said both publicly and privately, that in their view events in Angola have no relevance to East/West detente. They seen to have come to regard Angola as a test of United States ability or willingness to intervene against active Soviet policies in the third world, in areas where there is no existing Soviet/United States confrontation. Success in Angola could encourage them on future occasions to adopt more active policies in similar circumstances elsewhere.

10. Beyond the short term objective of ensuring that the MPLA will be the dominant force in Angola, Soviet plans are probably flexible. Their past unhappy experiences in Africa may have taught them caution in their expectations, but it would be reasonable for them to envisage a period in which Soviet and MPLA interests would march together. The probability is that the Russians will remain in a strong position of influence because of their ability to do several things. They can offer Angola substantial financial and technical aid in an immediate post-settlement situation involving the long term presence of a sizeable number of Soviet personnel as advisers and instructors; they can exploit continuing dependence of the MPLA armed forces on Soviet military supplies; and they can continue to exploit those issues of Southern African politics on which the Russians can assert identity with the views of black Africa. The Russians will shape their

tactics to meet any Western counter moves; they will not climb down from support of MPLA and they could in due course provide support for other liberation movements in Southern Africa, with increasing boldness. They will have seen nothing so far in the Western response to lead them to believe that detente is at risk.

Econonic

11. Angola's econonic resources are of little immediate interest to the Russians. We would expect an MPLA regime to nationalise Angola's oil and mineral resources, but although the Soviet Union and Cuba might then take some oil and other commodities in payment for services, we would expect any future Angolan government eventually to seek hard currency for the majority of its exports.

Strategic

12. Naval and air facilities in Angola are not essential for the Soviet Union, although they would have some intrinsic value in support of naval and naval air deployment in the South Atlantic area, and would be more important if for example the facilities in Guinea were lost or if the Suez Canal were again to be closed. If a pro-Soviet regime were established in Angola the Russians would probably ask initially for no more than the right to use harbours and anchorages and possibly airfields; later, if political developments continued favourably, they might wish to expand eg by setting up a naval maintainence complex similar to that at Berbera. But they are likely to put political considerations before military requirements.

IV. CURRENT SITUATION

13. The UNITA/FNLA alliance is falling apart and the MPLA are almost certainly now in a position where they cannot be defeated, whatever aid continues to be channelled to their opponents by the Americans and from other sources (short, of course, of the provision of aid on such a scale as to risk a direct United States/ Soviet confrontation; which seems most unlikely). The MPLA's chances of establishing military control of the whole of Angola are more problematical. They have a variety of fairly sophisticated weapons, including tanks, 122 mm rocket launchers in large quantities (this weapon has been particularly effective) and possibly, though not certainly, MIG aircraft. The number of Russians involved is probably only 2-300, most of whom are engaged in unloading and assembling

equipment in Luanda and Brazzaville or in servicing the aircraft bringing in supplies. The Cuban presence, however, is substantial (around 8,000 in Angola or Congo) and is increasing. Without the Cubans, who have taken the brunt of the fighting, the MPLA gains could not have been made. If Russian and Cuban aid continues, which is likely, and if the South Africans withdraw the MPLA may eventually succeed in occupying all the important towns. However, they would be unable to prevent UNITA and FNLA from reverting to guerilla activity in the areas from which they derive tribal support.

MPLA Personalities

14. Comparatively little is known in detail about the MPLA's relations with the Russians, though they must be assumed to be close. Senior members of MPLA regularly visit Moscow and their leader, Dr Agostinho Neto, who claims to be a Socialist rather than a Marxist, has been there several times. There are, however, factions within the MPLA and there can be little doubt that these reflect among other differences, varying degrees of ideological sympathy with the Soviet Union. Several of the leaders are of mixed blood. We do not know much about the attitudes of individuals within the movement, not many of whom are well known internationally. Lucio Lara, a member of the MPLA Central Committee, is sometimes described as potentially the most skilful politician within the movement and is known to be a strong left-wing nationalist. The front man, since independence, has been the Prime Minister, Lopo do Nascimento, smooth-mannered and seemingly moderate, and probably a light-weight. Among the military leaders, Nito Alves has emerged as a leader of the more extreme elements in MPLA and it was rumoured falsely last July that he had supplanted Neto. Nevertheless Neto's position is none too firm and it would not be too surprising if he were supplanted sooner or later. There have been several reports of attempts to assassinate him, the most recent in Luanda last year. Relations between the MPLA and Cuba must also be assumed to be close and it was noteworthy that a high-powered Cuban delegation appeared at Addis Ababa for the recent OAU Summit Conference, in support of the MPLA.

African attitudes

15. Attitudes of African states towards the rival movements in Angola were accurately reflected in the deadlock at the OAU Summit Conference. Although sometimes presented in broadly ideological terms, ie relative moderates against

relative militants, the picture is more complicated and in a number of important instances the attitude towards Angola is dictated primarily by self-interest. This applies, for obvious reasons, mainly to those countries nearest to Angola, some of whom - eg Zaire and Zambia - are seriously concerned at the damaging effect the continuing civil war is having on their own economies. Other countries have long-standing links with MPLA, for example Congo, who provided the Movements base facilities for guerilla operations, and Mozambique because of the links between FRELIMO and MPLA during the long struggle against the Portuguese. There are other factors not directly related to Angola, which reflect individual rivalries and differences between OAU members - for example, Nigerian rivalry with Zaire. It seems likely that the political advantage will gradually swing in MPLA's favour, notwithstanding the dead-heat in Addis Ababa; it is significant that no country has yet formally recognised the FNLA/UNITA government.

## V. OUTLOOK

### The need for continued Soviet and Cuban aid

16. The extent to which MPLA are likely to require continued Soviet and Cuban assistance once some kind of solution evolves in Angola will depend on whether this has been achieved by military victory or by a negotiated settlement. They are weak outside the urban centres and would face formidable problems in areas of traditional FNLA and UNITA support if they had come to no accommodation with either movement. In that event, MPLA's requirement for external assistance would be likely to persist for a long time and they would need all the help they could get. They would be able to control the country only by force and in the areas with tribal affinity to FNLA or UNITA guerilla activity would be expected to persist almost indefinitely; this applies particularly to southern Angola. The necessary support would no doubt be provided by the Soviet Union and Cuba. If, on the other hand, a negotiated solution were ultimately found, even if it affected only MPLA and UNITA to the exclusion of FNLA, the problem of control would be correspondingly easier. In that event, there would be much less need to rely on continuing Soviet and Cuban support; this is not to say that the MPLA would want to discard it entirely. So far the MPLA, appear to prefer to keep Soviet and Cuban aid and go for outright victory, rather than work for a negotiated solution which would reduce their dependence on outside help.

The "African dimension"

17. There are, however, other factors which could influence the future. Newly independent African countries have shown little gratitude to their previous sponsors and they tend to develop strong, sometimes extreme, nationalistic tendencies. Having rid themselves of their former imperial master, they appear determined to avoid coming under new domination. It is noticeable that even the puniest of independent African States feels no compunction in rebuffing on occasion a super-power, whether the United States or the Soviet Union. There is no reason to expect the MPLA, once they have the power (even if shared), to react differently; they are regarded by some other African States as exceptionally nationalistic and intransigent. Similarly, they are likely to want Cuban forces withdrawn once the military threats to their own position have been removed.

18. In evaluating the extent to which the MPLA will be subject to Soviet influence after a settlement, parallels have sometimes been drawn with Guinea and the Somali Democratic Republic, both of whom are fairly deeply involved with the Soviet Union and both of whom have granted facilities to the Soviet armed forces. Guinea's close links with the Soviet Union sten from President Sekou Toure's pathological fears in the early 1970s of Portuguese attack (partly justified by the assault on Conakry in 1973) when he turned to the Russians for protection. The Somalis turned to the Soviet Union for military assistance partly because they feared Ethiopian aggression and partly in terms of their own territorial ambitions, having failed to obtain help from the West. Somalia is also (unlike Angola) an exceptionally poor country. Although militarily reliant on the Soviet Union both the Guineans and the Somalis retain freedom of political manoeuvre and neither country can be regarded as a Soviet puppet. In Mozambique, FRELIMO also owed a good deal to Soviet support, although on nothing like the scale of Soviet support for MPLA. Despite their ideological similarity to MPLA, the Mozambique Government have developed sensible and practical relations with South Africa, without abandoning their public posture of left-wing militancy. Though it is early days, there is, as yet, no sign of excessive Soviet influence in Mozambique. But two important differences between Angola and Mozambique are that Frelimo did not have to fight for power against other movements backed by 'imperialist' powers and South Africa; and that Angola will not be under the same economic pressures to adopt a pragmatic policy towards South Africa.

19. There have been a number of indications that MPLA intend not to be tied down by obligations to either the Soviet Union or Cuba in the long run. These have come mainly from contacts with Nigeria and Ghana, both of whom appear to accept the MPLA protestations at face value. It is obviously good tactics for the MPLA, given the continuing reluctance of half the OAU to recognise them, to attempt to calm the apprehensions of those African states who are nervous about the Soviet/MPLA relationship. It was from MPLA contacts with Nigeria, through Lopo do Nascimento, that the abortive 'Simpson mission' derived. The Nigerians present themselves as having taken on the task of spearheading the elimination of Russian influence in Angola, and although some of their attitudes seem naive, they appear to believe that they have a reasonable chance of success. They (and the Ghanaians) argue that MPLA are not really Marxists and believe that they will be able to drive a wedge between MPLA and Russia, principally by enlisting the maximum amount of support among OAU countries for the MPLA position. The Nigerians have received a setback at the OAU Summit, but can be expected to persist. They also see the situation in terms of the need to create a strong Angola and to act as a buffer state between Black Africa and South Africa. Black African countries harbour genuine and deep-rooted fears of South African territorial ambitions.

20. It is the South African connection which, more than any other single factor, has damaged the prospects of both FNLA and UNITA. Had the South African intervention in support of UNITA not taken place, it is quite possible that the OAU would have voted at their recent Summit in favour of a government of national unity. A recent report quoted President Kenyatta as saying that the American suggestion that South African withdrawal should be equated with Soviet withdrawal was both tactless and insensitive and failed to take into account African susceptibilities over South Africa. Most Africans do not see the Angolan situation in simple pro- and anti- communist terms. They regard communism as a Western and not an African problem and see no reason why Africa should be expected to fight a war on behalf of the West. On the other hand, some African leaders, at least, are aware of the dangers to them of Soviet penetration.

The consequences for Angola's neighbours

21. The eventual outcome in Angola is of particular importance to Zambia and Zaire, both as neighbours and because of their economic interests referred to earlier. Both countries wish to see the Benguela railway opened as soon as possible, since alternative routes through Mozambique, Tanzania, and Rhodesia present operating or political problems. It seems unlikely that, whatever the extent of Soviet influence in Angola, the Benguela railway would be denied to these countries. Independent Angola needs all the revenues she can get and it will be in her interest to try to restore good relations with her neighbours; since the Soviet Union also has interests in Zambia and Zaire, the Russians will not want to prevent this. On Namibia, the situation is more difficult to predict since so much will depend on the success or otherwise of the present efforts to find a solution, mutually acceptable to the United Nations and to South Africa, to the future of the territory. If a solution were found, there would be less scope for Soviet mischief-making. If, on the other hand, negotiations break down or drag on for too long, there would be opportunities for the Soviet Union to channel aid to the South-West African Peoples' Movement (SWAPO) either directly or, more probably, through the OAU Liberation Committee. If improved base facilities were granted to SWAPO in Angola, their potential would be enhanced. The South Africans could be expected to react strongly to guerilla incursions, as they do already, with the consequent risk of a growing confrontation.

22. It seems less likely that Soviet influence in Angola would make much direct impact on Rhodesia. The Soviet Union support the Simbabwe African Peoples' Union (ZAPU), whose guerilla potential is at a very low ebb; subversion of Rhodesia could be based in Angola, but future incursions are more likely to come from Mozambique. The Russians probably calculate, however, that at some stage in the not too distant future, black/white confrontation will inevitably develop into sharper forms. They will wish in that event, to be involved, in their world power role, in efforts to find solutions. It is meanwhile in their interests to build up as much influence as possible in black African capitals. But the Russians are themselves lumped by Africans with Europeans from a purely racial point of view in marked contrast to African attitudes to the Chinese, whose unostentatious standards of living they respect, and with whom they identify as members of the Third World. In the Angolan context the Russians have themselves been dubbed by the Zairians as racist on the grounds that when the guerillas were fighting the Portuguese, they supplied only small amounts of military aid, whereas now that Africans are fighting one another, they have injected arms in massive quantities.

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